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THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

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A GRADED COURSE IN SCHOOLROOM GYMNASTICS

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Among the conditions to be dealt with in arranging a course in schoolroom gymnastics the one which stands out most prominently is the faulty posture in sitting and standing which is so characteristic of the untrained school child. Less to be noticed in the lowest grades, except in children whose strength has been depleted by illness, it becomes more and more frequent as the grades advance, until in the highest it is not unusual to find children whose rapid growth and lack of proper development has led to a condition of narrow chest and stooping shoulders which has gone too far ever to be entirely corrected. Besides the menace to health thus endured, these individuals must go through life lacking that advantage in all relations with others which goes with good physical presence. Improvement of posture and carriage then may be considered the prime object of schoolroom gymnastics.

Next to posture in importance comes the relief of congestions in the large abdominal veins where the blood gradually settles during sedentary occupations. Vigorous exercise is the only agency that can be depended on to relieve these congestions, through its call of the blood out into the working muscles and its pumping action on the great veins themselves. All of this effects, moreover, a quickened rhythm of heart, a deeper, fuller respiration, and a generally fresher feeling due to

the more rapid movement of lymph and removal of waste material from the tissues of the body.

Among other results to be accomplished by this work are the training in prompt and accurate response to direction, skill in handling the body through the development of the great neuro-muscular mechanism, and the subordination of the unit to the whole gained through concerted action.

Among these objects the one which differentiates gymnastics from other forms of exercise is the postural one. The physiological changes, the skill in handling the body, and, among adolescent children, the subordination of the individual for the good of the whole, may be reached more easily through games than gymnastics, and certain forms of dancing will accomplish the first two of these results as readily as games. But in neither games nor dancing is much thought given to the training of erect carriage with heads held high and chests full and active. Hence in gymnastic work this is a consideration which should never be lost sight of by the teacher. Her own carriage before the children, if she sets them a good example, will go a long way in helping her to secure results, and many a teacher has attested to the benefits which she herself has received in improved posture and proportions through having felt the necessity of living up to her teachings.

Three principles are most useful to hold in mind when working for correction of posture:

1. Overcorrection of the fault, in order to stretch short muscles and tighten relaxed ones. For instance in the frequent cases of narrow chests the muscles of the front of the chest need to be stretched while those between the shoulder blades should have a tuck taken in them. The children should assume this strongly corrected position before each movement in the lesson, after the few seconds of relaxation which should succeed each movement.

2. The retention of this strongly corrected position during an entire movement, because every exercise tends to make permanent the relations of the body which are held during its performance. An essentially good exercise can have only a bad

effect if taken with poor posture, for it will strengthen the muscles which hold that posture and thus make it even harder to overcome.

3. The education of the sense of posture. If a child stands in incorrect attitude when he makes conscientious effort to straighten up it shows that he does not recognize his own position. Admonition and explanation under these circumstances will do very little good. What is necessary is to mold him into the proper position and let him feel it. This manual correction may need to be done many times before the child will be able to interpret his muscle sensations correctly, but it is the only way in which he can adequately be taught to recognize what he is striving for, and it will finally bring results.

The teacher should carry in her mind a clear picture of the effect she wishes to accomplish by any direction or command, so that deviations from the desirable will strike her attention immediately. According to the prevalence or nature of the error the whole class may receive a few words of suggestion, or while they are standing in the rest position an explanation and illustration may be made, or the manual method may be used in individual cases. All faults cannot be corrected at once, and it should be recognized that the most important ones are those which detract from good carriage in any way—drooping heads and shoulders, flat chests, sway backs, etc. Details of exact direction or extent of movement or relations of hands and feet may properly take a secondary place in favor of the vital importance of posture.

It should also be remembered that the same general objects will be worked for in lesson after lesson, and though perfection may not be gained in any one set of exercises, that is no reason for discouragement or for drilling overtime on those exercises. Succeeding lessons, working for the same results through varied movements, will secure improvement without sacrificing it to monotony. Two weeks is a good period of time for the development of a lesson, introducing part of it at a time.

The manner of giving directions and commands is of great importance. There is a distinct art in modifying the tone of the

voice and its inflections so as to evoke the kind of response desired—brisk movements of the small segments of the body, slow movements of the trunk, quick preliminary action, vigorous muscular work, delicate control of balance, etc. This variety and flexibility in conducting a lesson make it a living thing, and call out the interest and co-operation of the child.

Fresh, cool air should always be freely admitted to the room at the time of the gymnastic lesson. This can best be done by opening windows, with due regard for cold drafts. In buildings with ventilating systems the objections of the janitor can usually be overcome by opening all the windows at once.

In this course the method of work will vary for different ages. For children under eight years, or roughly for the first and second grades, the method recommended is the gymnastic story play, with its appeal to the dramatic interest, its absence of abstract terms, its mingling of spontaneity with directed work. In the other grades gymnastic exercises by command will be used, with their appeal to the interest in military uniformity and precision in the younger children, and to self-improvement among the older ones, where the introduction of simple dance steps will also bring in an aesthetic interest.

In all grades a short drill in sitting posture should preface the lesson. At the direction, "Straight sitting position!" for the little people, and the command, "Attention!" for those who have reached the dignity of gymnastics, an erect posture is assumed, the feet flat on the floor, the hips pushed well back against the chair back, the upper part of the trunk poised sufficiently far forward so that it is easy to hold the required posture of active chest, straight neck, and high head. The arms should hang straight down at the sides. At "Rest!" the children lean back against the chairbacks and relax. This alternation of position should be repeated several times, with care to get really good posture.

The story play and the gymnastics by command are so different in method of development that they will be considered separately.

THE GYMNASTIC STORY PLAY

The gymnastic story play may be considered as an informal method of dealing with formal material—gymnastics—or a formal method of dealing with informal material—the story. Briefly, it consists of a series of something like six exercises grouped about a simple story of childish activities. The story must be one which will appeal to the fundamental interest of the child in order to be enjoyed by him during a series of lessons, and it must be capable of dramatization through exercises which conform to the requirements of a good gymnastic lesson.

As far as possible the themes of the stories may well be chosen with relation to the season of the year, as "The Picnic" in May, or to the holidays which are approaching, as in the case of "Christmas Morning" in December and the "Soldier Play," which comes in the same month as Memorial Day. The interest in the "Christmas Morning" grows more and more lively throughout the month of December, although it will fail to call forth more than passive interest after the first of January. In the same way the "Valentine's Day" story will be the center of great enthusiasm for the two or three weeks ending February 14, after which it falls flat.

The set of story plays which will be suggested in this outline are adapted to children who live in a temperate climate and who know something of both the city and the country. If there are winter stories which will not appeal to southern children or country stories which will not appeal to city children there is abundant opportunity for teachers to work out new story plays to fit such conditions, always remembering the two main requirements—a story which shall be simple and fundamental in its interest and exercises which make up a good gymnastic lesson.

The exercises should be about six in number, and should always give representation to the following classes of movements: postural correction, arm and shoulder girdle, trunk, leg, respiratory, and running or jumping. Two classes of movements are not infrequently found combined in the same exercise, as in kneeling and picking flowers, where the leg and trunk muscles are used, or in rowing a boat, in which trunk and arm muscles

are used and a strong corrective element introduced, or in climbing a ladder, where arms and legs work together. There is a decided advantage in these combination movements for they give opportunity for more vigorous and widespread exercise than is obtained when pure types of movements are used of such simplicity that they are suitable for little children, and they make possible the use of perfectly natural neuro-muscular co-ordinations. The combination of leg and trunk exercises with other classes is especially desirable since this is the age at which the development of the large fundamental groups of leg and trunk muscles is going on rapidly and locomotion for its own enjoyment forms a large part of all play.

The order of the exercises must largely be determined by the story, though it is usually possible so to arrange a story that the more vigorous exercises come toward the end, and usually it will be found that the respiratory exercise occurs at or near the end, following a more vigorous exercise. It will be noticed that the respiratory movements are always taken with inhalation through the nose and exhalation through the mouth. This is for the purpose of avoiding confusion on the part of the child, who at this age finds it difficult to discriminate between the two acts if the mouth is kept closed. With the aid of this little device the teacher can be sure of her results.

The method of presenting and conducting the story play must be carefully considered, for it must be very gently and skilfully guided between the Scylla of a formal gymnastic lesson on the one hand and the Charybdis of mere entertainment for the children on the other. There must be a delicate balance which will permit careful correction of posture without focusing the child's attention on his anatomy, concerted response to direction without rigidity, acquirement of the habit of rhythm without conscious drill, and on the other hand spontaneity of suggestion without waste of time, freedom of expression without loss of attention to the teacher's directions, and enjoyment without disorder.

It must always be remembered that the gymnastic story play is fitted to secure postural correction and improvement just as

surely as is a gymnastic lesson, and to this end a strong posture must be called for before each movement and must prevail during its performance. It is well to use the word, "Position!" immediately before each movement. The response should be the quick assumption of the erect standing position, which should mean essentially for little children heads high, chests active, and weight evenly balanced on the feet. A little child usually gives his chest credit for occupying the entire front of his body, and abdomen as well as chest is likely to become round and prominent in his efforts for good posture. The suggestion, "Big up here" (with teacher's hand on chest), and "Little down here" (with her hand on abdomen) is helpful in correcting this error in anatomical conception. "Tall heads" and "Stand tall" are good admonitions to swear by. The recognition of a fine round chest by a friendly tap upon it will often result in a large crop of them.

There will be children who are not reached by any of these suggestions, however, children with cramped, weak chests and prominent shoulder blades who are unable of their own volition to assume the proper attitude. These the teacher must help by laying her hands on the shoulders, and with her thumbs on the prominent shoulder blades and fingers over the front of the shoulder joints she must roll the offending shoulders up and off the chest, at the same time forcing the chest forward with her thumbs into its proper place. Gradually a child so helped acquires through the training of his muscle sense the ability to correct himself.

These more or less anatomical methods of correction are necessary in obtaining good starting posture, but during the performance of the exercises abstract suggestions are usually out of place. Almost always a suggestion in line with the dramatization of the story will bring the desired result. If in pushing a baby carriage the children lean forward and cramp the chest it is well to remind them that this is a full-sized baby carriage, and that they may even have to reach up to grasp the handle, or that surely only strong-looking children would be allowed by the mother to take the baby out riding. If in coasting down hill the

children's backs show a tendency to hump it is only necessary to pretend that a race is going on and that the children with the straightest backs will reach the foot of the hill first, and every child will immediately make an effort to have that straightest back. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

In the same way unnecessary noise in running or jumping can usually be controlled by dramatic suggestion. If we find that the feet are heavy in the hopping in the story "Birds Learning to Fly" we do not try to see how lightly the *children* can hop, but we remember that little birds *never* make a noise hopping on the limb of a tree, and straightway most concentrated effort is made for light feet. The suggestion that the running is being done on the grass or the snow conduces to easy elimination of noise in that exercise. In many plays the exhalation effort in the respiratory exercise is accompanied by a tone, or a whistle, or a hissing sound, and, being rather fascinating, the sound tends to be prolonged, but suggestions correlating the sound with the story will serve to control this exuberance.

It is well to take two lessons for the introduction of a new gymnastic story play, so that the children may not become tired by being given so much new material in so short a time. Every teacher's individuality will show in her method of introducing the lesson, but certain suggestions are appropriate. After setting a background in which to place the story it is well to take up at one time only that part of it which refers to one movement. Telling the whole story at once is likely to result in too much talking and too little exercise, and often tires the children. It should be unnecessary to emphasize the need of a strong, vigorous posture on the part of the teacher throughout the lesson (not to speak of the rest of the session), for admonition without example does not sink in very deeply. She should study out the possibilities for correction of posture and for vigor of exercise in each movement and should be careful to illustrate it accurately to the children. Large arm and leg movements with free use of shoulder and hip joints should be encouraged; small hand and foot exercises have little value.

At first the teacher will find it necessary to take the move-

ments with the children. As they know the play better, however, she should work toward developing an independent response from them both for their own sake and because it will give her a better opportunity to move among them making corrections.

Between the movements there should be relaxation. If the child naturally relaxes, as is usually the case, nothing need be said about it, but if the movement has keyed him up to military erectness a direction for resting will be necessary. "Rest position" is convenient, and means that the child stands at ease with feet in the stride position, thus usually insuring an even distribution of weight between them.

It goes without saying that a childlike spirit should pervade the giving of the lesson, both its story and its action. The teacher's voice, by its brightness and the use of the staccato in directions which call for swift response will bring out the quickness of motion which is characteristic of children. Rising from a squatting or a bending to an erect standing position should always be done briskly, both because it brings better posture than a slow action and because it usually also brings a smile to the face of the child; the bright staccato use of the direction "Up!" will usually accomplish this result.

If the children are performing their movements vigorously, using large motions and getting a corrective effect, it is not necessary that there should be uniformity in the small details of exact direction, or exact extent, of motion, or position of feet, or of an arm which is perhaps not being used at the time. Such details are better passed by lightly. In rhythmic exercises such as running in place, the teacher should set the time for the class, and this should be done before the direction is given at all in order that the children may feel the rhythm before starting to express it. A few seconds spent in preliminary beating of time will often save confusion later. The fact that the child's natural rhythm is faster than the adult's should always be remembered.

It is not worth while to spend much time in training little children to discriminate between left and right. It is such a difficult mental process for them that it makes the action of the play unwarrantably slow. On the other hand much may be

done toward educating them in the appreciation of left and right by using the terms and indicating by a gesture which side is meant.

The length of time a lesson should occupy is about ten minutes. Less will make it difficult to obtain results in both posture and vigor of exercise; more may result in a loss of fresh, concentrated attention. Ten minutes wisely used is sufficient to give the child a strong impulse in the direction of better carriage, so that he is proud to have it and glad to respond to suggestions concerning it which will of course be necessary at other times of day.

There are usually several good opportunities in each story for the children to make suggestions which will help keep the whole plot vital for them. They like to tell what kinds of flowers they are picking, or what the birds see on the ground, or what the firemen save from the burning building. Since there is only ten minutes' time for everything these contributions must be sought and given without wasting time, an error which it would be easy to fall into. It serves the double purpose of saving time and emphasizing posture to call on particular children for suggestions because they look so tall and strong that you think they would give good ones. Tall and strong posture thus comes to take the place of the wild waving of hands if children wish to voice their ideas. The question, "How many" have accomplished this or that will usually bring response from the whole class, to their own satisfaction and with very little expenditure of time.

Most of the story plays may be used with advantage for about a month, especially if on one day of the week, preferably Wednesday, a game be substituted for the story play. In this way a story play is not repeated on consecutive days sufficiently to risk monotony, and, which is quite as important, a regular period of supervised play is insured of sufficient length for a real game. Thus the children are given occasion for the freedom of expression of developing tendencies and characteristics which is best afforded by play and the teacher has a valuable opportunity for studying and guiding those tendencies and

characteristics. Shorter game periods, by the way, should be introduced between lessons at other times of day.

During September and June I would not use anything even so little formal as the gymnastic story play. In September the children are having difficulty in adapting themselves to the confinement of indoor life after the vacation, and the gymnastic period is best used for supervised *outdoor* games. In June the strain of the long indoor year is showing in increasing restlessness and drooping, and it is good practice to drop gymnastic stories and to return again to outdoor games.

Following are two gymnastic story plays suggested for autumn:

AUTUMN IN THE WOODS

FOR FIRST GRADE

(Adapted from *Gymnastic Stories and Plays*, by Rebecca Stonerod, M.D.;
D. C. Heath & Co.)

Story.—The children go out to play in the woods. First they sit down and pretend that they are the little flowers that go to sleep every night and are awakened by the sunlight in the morning, or perhaps that Jack Frost has nipped them and made them close their eyes. The leaves are falling gently and the children catch great basketfuls and throw them over their heads. They reach high for especially pretty leaves and then scatter them, making a leaf-carpet about their feet. Now they kneel, gather great armfuls of the leaves, rise, and toss them in this direction or that. Now they are ready for a run. And they follow their leader in and out among the trees, and they pant breathlessly afterward.

Exercises:

1. Going to sleep like sleepy flowers.

Purpose: Practice in straight sitting position.

Starting position: Straight sitting position.

Signals: A. Go to sleep, or Jack Frost comes.

Child assumes rest sitting position with head relaxed and dropped on chest, eyes shut.

B. Morning! or Wake up! or Sunshine!

Child instantly assumes straight sitting position with eyes open.

2. Catching leaves in baskets and throwing them over the head.

Purpose: Correction of chest and upper spine.

Starting position: Standing position.

- Signals: A. Make your baskets.
Clasp hands in front.
- B. Catch.
Raise arms to height of shoulders, bending elbows so that arms circumscribe a circular opening.
- C. Toss.
Swing arms overhead without unclasping hands.
3. Reaching up and making the leaves fall.
Purpose: Correction of chest and upper spine.
Signals: A. Reach.
Swing arms high over head and look up.
- B. Scatter.
Pretend to scatter leaves softly on ground.
4. Gathering armfuls of fallen leaves and throwing them about.
Purpose: Back and leg exercise.
Signals: A. On left (right) knee—down.
Kneel with body erect.
- B. Gather.
Bend forward and sweep arms through imaginary leaves, gathering a quantity.
- C. Straight up.
Straight kneeling position, arms still clasped about leaves.
- D. Stand.
Quickly regain straight standing position.
- E. Throw.
Pretend to toss leaves in any direction suggested.
5. Running among trees.
Purpose: General exercise.
Signal: Run.
One row follows another around room.
6. Panting after the run.
Purpose: Deep breathing.
Signals: A. Breathe in.
Through the nose.
- B. Breathe out.
Through the mouth.

Suggestions for holding interest:

Mention of a recent frost.

Get full baskets before throwing leaves.

Ask for colors and kinds of leaves. The children who look up the straightest will probably see the prettiest ones.

Ask for suggestions as to where they shall throw leaves—through a window, to the teacher, to each other, etc.

AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE
FOR SECOND GRADE

Story.—The uncle of one of the children takes the whole class out to the country in his automobile for a ride. They help him crank the automobile and when they reach the country they climb a high rail fence to get into a field where they see a pump. There they pump water for each other, and later they push each other in a rope swing in one of the trees, going high up in the air. In the grass they find thistledown and blow it far and wide. As it begins to grow dark they see fireflies twinkling, and running back to the automobile they try to catch them.

Exercises:

1. Cranking the automobile.

Purpose: Trunk and arm exercise.

Signals: A. With left (right) hand take hold of crank.

Bend forward at hip joint, spine straight, and grasp imaginary crank.

B. Crank it.

Pull up strongly with arm, shoulder, and back, swinging arm in outward circle.

2. Climbing the fence.

Purpose: Leg and arm exercise.

Signals: A. Left.

Lift left hand high and bend up left knee.

B. Right.

Same on right side.

C. Left.

D. Right.

E. Jump.

Jump forward, landing softly on toes.

3. Pumping water.

Purpose: Trunk and arm exercise.

Signals: A. Hands on pump handle.

Raise bent elbows to shoulder height, hands in front of chest.

B. Push.

Bend trunk forward at hip joint, spine straight, arms pushed straight down.

C. Pull.

Raise body to erect position and bend arms up again.

4. Swinging each other.

Purpose: Arms and correction of chest.

Signals: A. Pull.

Raise both arms well back overhead, holding imaginary swing seat.

B. Push.

Push arms vigorously forward and upward, at the same time stepping forward with one (either) foot.

5. Blowing thistledown.

Purpose: Deep breathing.

Signals: A. Toss up the thistledown.

Make a tossing motion.

B. Breathe.

Inhale.

C. Blow.

Exhale, blowing breath upward.

6. Catching fireflies.

Purpose: General exercise.

Signal: Ready—run.

Each row runs round the room catching imaginary fireflies with hands.

Suggestions for holding interest:

Whose uncle, whose field, whose turn to swing?